



12

Indian Arts and Crafts Act ensures authenticity

The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-644) is a truth-in-advertising law that prohibits misrepresentation in marketing of Indian arts and crafts products within the United States.

It is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian Tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States.

Under the Act, an Indian is defined as a member of any federally or officially State recognized Indian Tribe, or an individual certified as an Indian artisan by an Indian Tribe.

should obtain written certification from the individual vendors that their Indian arts or craft-work were produced by tribal members or by certified Indian artisans.

For more information, visit www.iacb.doi.gov.

NATIVE NEWS

Native News compiled by
Dyani Bingham
(dyani_b@hotmail.com)
for *State of the Arts*

Indians write here

William YellowRobe launches center for Native American playwrights

By Josh Wagner
Reprinted with permission
from the *Missoula Independent*, Aug. 28

If you're heading north on Highway 93 and not paying attention, you might drive through Arlee without noticing the small town. The new Playwrights' Center of the Bearhead Swaney Inter-tribal Theatre Company is equally unassuming.

When I first walked in I was sure I'd come to the wrong place. All I saw were a dozen empty café tables, one old cowboy drinking a cup of coffee and a waitress, who, when I mentioned that I was looking for Artistic Director William YellowRobe, hooked a thumb over her shoulder and told me, "He's in the back."

Arlee's Hangin Art Gallery and Coffee House has cleared out a space right next to the kitchen that I'm told will seat up to 75 people. Three rows of chairs face a small, carpeted stage where a cast of seven actors prepare for the night's staged reading of YellowRobe's play, "Frog's Dance."

"We're still doing rewrites, even in final rehearsals," YellowRobe tells me.

Script development is what a playwrights' center is all about, and that makes it one-of-a-kind. According to YellowRobe, the center will be the first organization in the nation with the specific mission to workshop and develop new works by Native American writers. (The Autry in Los Angeles holds annual playwright workshops for Native Americans.)

YellowRobe also envisions a center that not only introduces writing and theater disciplines into tribal communities, but also creates residency opportunities for contemporary Native American playwrights to hone their craft.

It's been a long time coming. YellowRobe talks about his struggles as a Native American in the theater world back in the 1980s.

"There were no Native playhouses back then," he says. "At the university I would try out for every part of every play, and the directors would always say, 'Bill, you're a good actor but we have no Indian roles.' Then I started writing and directors would say, 'Bill, we'd love to put on this play, but we have no Indian actors.'"

Since then the national Native American theater community has blossomed, and new

playhouses have sprung up across the country. But until now there hasn't been a full-time dedicated foundation for developing work.

"The center is a way for Native people to claim ownership of our own voice," Yellowrobe says.

YellowRobe ran a Theater Arts Camp for youth at the Arlee Powwow Grounds in 2001. He also offered writing residencies at the Hangin Art Gallery for a couple of years until 2003, when he was pulled away from the Montana theater community after winning a Pew Charitable Trust Fellowship at Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, RI.

He spent the next 11 years on the East Coast teaching dramatic writing at the University of Maine and Brown University, developing his own work and receiving national recognition and residencies for playwriting.

"Frog's Dance" is the story of a former powwow competition dancer who feels useless after a terrible accident. The process of writing the one-act play encapsulates YellowRobe's circular journey perfectly, because he wrote the first draft in 2001 and has been developing it ever since.

Such is the life of a script in the theater world. We might imagine an inspired playwright sitting down one evening to kick out a ready-made piece of work, but the reality is that most scripts go through dozens of rewrites, workshops and readings before they are ready to be produced on a main stage.

"Frog's Dance" is still in the process, and the reading is the first step in introducing it to an audience. What seemed at first a simple back room in a café quickly transforms itself as the audience arrives that night, filling the space to standing-room only.

The actors draw from this energy to give a stirring performance of YellowRobe's play. At one point I look up to see a pair of legs dangling off the balcony overhead. Now it feels like a theater.

"It's an intimate space," YellowRobe says. "And in a lot of ways it's very much like an off-Broadway house."

YellowRobe says he expects the center to bring in some big names from the theater



Preparing for a reading at the new Playwrights' Center of the Bearhead Swaney Inter-tribal Theatre Company, housed at Hangin' Art Gallery in Arlee.

(Photo by Josh Wagner)



Photo by Laurie Lambrecht

The center is a way for Native people to claim ownership of our own voice."

— Playwright William Yellowrobe

world. The national advisory board already includes some heavy hitters such as Oskar Eustis, a New York University professor of dramatic writing and the artist director for New York's The Public Theater, and Lou Belamy, an OBIE-award winning director and the artistic director for the Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, MN. Bellamy produced the first professional production of Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright August Wilson.

Paramount to YellowRobe's goals is his commitment to community and social justice. He speaks eloquently about Native American issues and recent immigration concerns in the Southwest.

"We are taught to hate and fear without really understanding the problem," YellowRobe says. "You see these kids coming across the border. Maybe they're coming back to their native homeland. They were here long before there was a United States."

On the surface, "Frog's Dance" tells the story of a disfigured Native American's search for self-acceptance, and it is far more personal than political. But the cultural significance behind the work shines through. "I never write real political plays," he says, "but it's always there."

YellowRobe recently won the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Residency for 2014, and adapted David Seals' novel *Powwow Highway* into a full-length play, which is scheduled to open in New York this fall. His big ambitions as a writer aren't going anywhere, but his passion appears to be for the center and its potential impact on Native American communities.

Sitting out in front of the café, we spend a moment admiring the Mission Mountains. I ask him if his intentions are to stay in Montana. "Oh yes," he says. "People in New York pay thousands of dollars just to spend a few days here."

Buy Native and help preserve artistic traditions

This Christmas season, it's important to support and buy from Native artisans and Native-owned businesses throughout Montana. You can visit Native galleries and gift shops and buy directly from Native artists at art shows, powwows and online.

The Native American Made in Montana website, www.madeinmontanausa.com, is a great resource for both Native artists and online shoppers. The website currently features 27 Native American Made in Montana producers, with product lines ranging from ribbon shirts, drums, moccasins, Christmas ornaments and bead jewelry to antler carvings, painted buffalo hides, and much more.

For a product to bear the Native American Made in Montana logo, it must have been made in the state by an enrolled member of one of the eight tribal nations that call Montana home. The logo ensures the products are actually Native Made, which helps support the artisans and their families.

Buying Native:

- encourages small business growth;

- supports Native families;
- brings new money into reservation communities;
- encourages artistic excellence;
- builds pride;
- promotes cultural understanding and awareness;
- educates consumers; and
- ensures economic opportunities for Native entrepreneurs.

It is also important to note that many Native-made goods are often one-of-a-kind pieces that cannot be duplicated or found anywhere else in the world. It is important to educate others that you may pay a little bit more for the Native-made product because the item is handmade and the result of many years of preserving artistic traditions and innovation.

Learn more at www.madeinmontanausa.com.

